

# Congress tackling drought relief to aid California

---

 [fresnobee.com/2014/06/17/3982380/congress-tackling-drought-relief.html](http://fresnobee.com/2014/06/17/3982380/congress-tackling-drought-relief.html)

By Michael Doyle

Lawmakers working both above and below the surface on California drought relief are making explicit progress this week.

While insisting on secrecy for key deal-making, House of Representatives and Senate members are also publicly moving legislation. A \$34.2 billion energy and water funding bill approved Tuesday by a Senate panel, and related movement on the House side expected Wednesday, showcase the overt side of the ledger.

"The purpose is to help mitigate the impact of severe drought," Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., said of the Senate bill Tuesday.

Feinstein chairs the energy and water panel of the Senate Appropriations Committee, which approved the Fiscal 2015 bill that boosts Interior Department funding above what the Obama administration sought. The bill includes "over \$100 million" to help the Bureau of Reclamation "address the exceptional drought conditions" afflicting the West, according to a bill summary.

The bill, however, does not specify any California projects in particular.

"There are no earmarks in this bill, I say unfortunately," Feinstein noted.

The exact language of the Senate bill approved quickly by voice vote won't be made public until the full committee acts Thursday. In some California ways, though, it already differs from a House version set for House Appropriations Committee approval Wednesday.

The House version, unlike the Senate's, includes farmer-friendly language that appears to redirect certain funding in the Central Valley away from wildlife refuges and habitat restoration and toward irrigation facility improvements.

Environmental advocate Patricia Schifferle, a critic of the measure, said the House provision would "favor wealthy subsidized irrigators."

The language popped up in the House's draft energy and water bill without warning, potentially as a placeholder for other California anti-drought provisions to be crafted later. Whether this happens is one of the key tactical questions now facing those lawmakers admitted to the negotiating table.

Quiet discussions have been taking place since the Republican-controlled House passed a 68-page version of a separate California water bill in February and the Democratic-controlled Senate passed Feinstein's significantly different, 16-page bill by voice vote in May.

"Meetings are ongoing, and we'll see where we get at the end of the day," said Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Tulare. "It's important to lay all the problems out."

The House bill, for instance, limits part of a landmark 1992 law that directed more water to protect the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. It removes wild-and-scenic protections from a half-mile of the Merced River in order to potentially expand McClure Reservoir. It allows more storage at New Melones Reservoir, lengthens federal irrigation contracts to 40 years and pre-empts some state law.

The Senate bill includes none of those provisions. Some of it locks into place steps the Obama administration has already taken on its own.

"We're having conversations across the Capitol, looking for the areas where there might be agreement," said Rep. David Valadao, R-Hanford.

Tactically, one possibility has always been to fold whatever California drought provisions get negotiated into the final energy and water funding bill. Because it's needed to keep the federal government running, the appropriations legislation is effectively guaranteed of passage.

But given a choice, lawmakers would rather keep the California water bill separate. On Tuesday, Feinstein said the energy and water package approved by her subcommittee was not the vehicle for moving the broader California drought provisions.

"This is not it," Feinstein said.

So far, the California drought bill discussions have excluded Northern California Democrats, who voted against the House bill. The substance of the discussions, and even their time and place, are being kept under tight wraps.

Last Thursday, for instance, Feinstein's office and House Republicans declined to speak about a planned water meeting until after it had been canceled, in the wake of a special GOP caucus session called by party leaders. Negotiators say they want to avoid premature leaks.

The reporter can be reached at (202) 383-0006, [mdoyle@mcclatchydc.com](mailto:mdoyle@mcclatchydc.com) or or [@MichaelDoyle10](https://twitter.com/MichaelDoyle10) on Twitter.